

May 23, 2008

Weed & Seed takes on housing, college

Program's latest initiative will help low-income families purchase homes

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Chris Burkhardt of Lafayette is two semesters shy of earning an associate degree from Ivy Tech Community College.

Later, he hopes to study organizational leadership and supervision at Purdue University.

For the 23-year-old, the push to get his life on track came in an unusual way: a 16-month stint in jail for possessing a large amount of marijuana.

"In a way, it was the best thing that could have happened to me," he said.

Burkhardt and other success stories from Tippecanoe Superior Court 1 Judge Don Johnson's Re-entry Court are being tapped as potential candidates for a new initiative designed to help working families and individuals own a home and obtain higher education.

Officials with the city of Lafayette and United Way of Greater Lafayette introduced the Individual Development Account program on Thursday. It's the latest enterprise to come from the city's Weed & Seed efforts.

"Ultimately ... this program benefits the entire community," James Taylor, executive director of United Way of Greater Lafayette, said. "By building a bridge toward the future for low-income families and individuals, we will develop a work force that we need now and in the future."

Last September, Lafayette received a five-year, \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to implement Weed & Seed, a program aimed at reducing crime and revitalizing the community.

It targets Lafayette's downtown and near-downtown areas, identified by officials as having a higher amount of crime, poverty and short-term residents.

A group that packed into council chambers at city hall this morning heard from Gary Becker, mayor of Racine, Wis., about the Individual Development Account program. Racine manages the model program for other cities nationwide.

He said the program so far has helped 39 individuals or families obtain a home in Racine. They're taught everything from fiscal responsibility to property maintenance -- even after settling into the home.

"We're not handing out anything," Becker said. "We're here to help people, giving them a hand up, enabling them to change their lives.

" ... It changes people, and that's the part you need to focus on."

JoAnn Miller, an associate professor of sociology at Purdue University, was the Weed & Seed proposal writer.

She said Lafayette's effort will aim to help 50 people obtain homeownership and 100 people receive education at Ivy Tech Community College. To qualify, participants must be within 200 percent of poverty level.

Last year in Indiana, the poverty level for a family of four was \$20,650, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The homes will be within the city's Weed & Seed target area, though participants can come from Tippecanoe and even surrounding counties, she said.

Burkhardt, who said he has thrown away thousands of dollars renting, said the program is something he would like to pursue.

"Owning my home is definitely a goal in the near future," he said. "Eventually, I'm going to have to settle down. By owning my own home, I'd feel like I'm working toward something. ... The re-entry program has really helped me establish myself in the community."